

DEFINITIONS OF PRIMARY SOURCES AND REASONS TO USE THEM

A. **Primary Sources** are first-hand accounts of an event, a person's life, original works of literature, and historical facts. They are in their original form, usually without explanation or interpretation. Primary sources can be letters, diaries, court records, speeches and photographs.

Secondary sources are often written by people who were not present when the event occurred. They are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened. Secondary sources are based on a variety of other sources and can include books, journal articles, textbooks, and reference sources.

<http://www.masshist.org/bh/guidedefs.html>

B. Historian Mary Lynn Rampolla defines [**primary sources**] as "materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration." . . . Primary sources can include not just written documents (e.g., letters) but also the material remains (e.g., furniture, art, architecture, music) of a specific time and place. Primary sources are the essential building blocks for the historian's reconstruction of a moment in time.

<http://www.wm.edu/hwrc/worksheets/primarysources.html>

C. Teaching with **primary documents** encourages a varied learning environment for teachers and students alike. Lectures, demonstrations, analysis of documents, independent research, and group work become a gateway for research with historical records in ways that sharpen students' skills and enthusiasm for history social studies, and the humanities.

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/>

D. The sources available to [students for their] research could often be more accurately described as **primary source surrogates**. For example, instead of examining an individual's diary directly, you may find yourself using reproduced images of its pages—or, more likely yet, a typed transcription of its contents. Or, instead of experiencing a sculpture firsthand, you may be dependent upon photographs of it. Obviously, some primary source surrogates are better than others.

<http://ww2.lafayette.edu/~library/guides/primarysources/definitions.html>

E. **Primary sources** expose students to multiple perspectives on great issues of the past and present. History, after all, deals with matters that were furiously debated by the participants. Interpretations of the past are furiously debated as well, among historians, policy makers, politicians, and ordinary citizens. *By working with primary sources, students can become involved in these debates.*

Primary sources help students develop knowledge, skills, and analytical abilities. By dealing directly with primary sources, students engage in asking questions, thinking critically, making intelligent inferences, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues in the past and present.

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/fw.html>

Sources for Primary Research

Note: Provenance (chain of ownership) must be established for personal belongings; date and authority of sources must be established, particularly in the case of items marked with an asterisk.

advertisements	financial records & audits	political cartoons
advertising brochures	fishing licenses	posters
applications	folk songs	postcards
audio recordings	furniture	pottery
autobiographies*	government documents	pre-nuptial agreements
autographs	gradebooks	press releases
automobile titles	graduation programs	professional licenses
award certificates	greeting cards	programs of events
bank records	Halloween costumes	quilts
Bible records	hand-crafted articles	receipts
bills of sale	handbills	report cards
biographies*	hardware & tools	reports*
birth announcements	historic documents	recipe cards & publications
birth certificates	home movies	research notes & files
blueprints	hunting licenses	sales slips & receipts
business records	insurance certificates	schedules
calendars	interviews*	school transcripts
cemetery records	jewelry	scrapbooks
census records	kitchen tools & gadgets	sermons
checks	land records	sheet music
children's clothing	legal documents	shipping documents
christening records	letters	shoes, boots, hats
Christmas letters	magazines*	shopping lists
church certificates	maps, charts, diagrams	sketchbooks
church bulletins & records	marriage announcements	song lyrics
clinical case reports	marriage licenses	speeches
clothing	medals	spirituals
coins	medical records	stamps
Congressional records	membership cards	tax records
contracts	memoranda	team statistics
court records	military records	telegrams
credit card receipts	minutes of meetings	telephone memos
daybooks	mortgages	theatre programs
death certificates	music scores	timetables
deeds	news film footage	titles to vehicles
diaries & journals	newsletters	tombstones
diplomas	newspapers*	tools
directions	notebooks	toys and games
divorce papers	operator's certificates	trading cards
driver's licenses	oral history*	transportation records
drawings & paintings	organizational charts	travel & history brochures
e-mail	parish records	trophies
election certificates	patents	video recordings
embroidery	personnel folders	weapons & equipment
ephemera (menus, tickets)	photographs	wills
fashion artifacts	play programs	writing implements (pens, nibs, inkwells, etc.)
field notes	poetry	yearbooks
films	political campaign items	

Outstanding Links to Teaching Guides for Primary Sources

- **Tennessee State Library and Archives.** <http://www.state.tn.us/tsla/>
- **Middle Tennessee State University.** <http://www.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/tn-primary.html>
- “Using Primary Sources on the Web”: first-rate source of basic information about identifying, finding, and evaluating primary sources on the internet.
<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA/>
- Magnificent, thoughtful resource from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum. <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/primsrce.html>
- Very helpful site from University of California at **Berkeley**: explains primary sources and lists a multitude of search strategies for locating them.
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySources.html>
- **Eurodocs:** Brigham Young U. collection of primary documents from Western Europe (transcriptions, facsimiles, translations) http://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main_Page
- **Library of Congress: American Memory.** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/index.html>
- **Library of Congress Learning Page.** <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html>
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/source.html>
- **National Endowment for the Humanities: Edcitement / Marco Polo.**
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=364
- “**Primary Source Materials & Document Based Questions**”: great list of Internet resources created by the **Nassau County NY** Board of Cooperative Educational Services; suggestions for designing document-based questions and assessment tools.
<http://images.library.uiuc.edu/projects/tdc/LessonPlans/PSGrade1Lesson1.html>
- **DocSouth** at the **University of North Carolina**: includes a Teacher’s Tool Kit with classroom activities and documentation info. Outstanding. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/>
- “**A Treasury of Primary Documents**”: immense database featuring transcriptions of historical documents relating in any way to American history – everything from the Magna Carta to Ben Franklin’s will. Very useful website.
<http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/primarysources.html#bc>
- **UCLA Institute on Primary Resources:** includes sample lesson plans, explanations, and links to additional sites. <http://ipr.ues.gseis.ucla.edu/classroom/lessons.html>
- An introduction to digitization from **University of Illinois at Urbana**, with links to other libraries. <http://images.library.uiuc.edu/resources/introduction.htm>
- Sample lesson plan from **University of Illinois at Urbana** website: a lesson for first graders on understanding artifacts as primary sources.
<http://images.library.uiuc.edu/projects/tdc/LessonPlans/PSGrade1Lesson1.html>
- “**Making of America (MOA)**” Collection at the **University of Michigan**: excellent collection of primary sources in American social history, primarily from the antebellum period through reconstruction. <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moa/>
- **The Avalon Project at Yale Law School:** Documents in law, history, and diplomacy.
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>
- **Best of History Websites:** useful links to many social studies education sites:
<http://www.besthistorysites.net/LessonPlans.shtml>
- Database of lesson plans for different grade levels on using library resources.
<http://www.libraryinstruction.com/lessons.html>
- Constitution lesson plan: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-workshop/index.html#instructions>

Helping Students Begin to Analyze Primary Sources

Author

1. Who created the source and why?
2. Was this record created through an impulsive act, a routine transaction, or a deliberate process? Is it an officially-sanctioned version of the event?
3. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event or merely report what others saw and heard?
4. Are there any factors to suggest the author's motivation for recording this event? For example, was he a neutral party, or did he have opinions or interests that might have influenced his interpretation of the events?
5. What qualifications does the author have that would make you trust his testimony? For example, what are the author's credentials--educational background, experience, previous writings?

Date of Publication

1. When was the source produced/published?
2. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some period of time? (Be as specific as possible about determining the amount of time between the event and the record.)
3. Is this the first version or edition of this piece? (Note: later versions may be revised.)

Intended Purpose and Audience

1. Was the source intended to be public or private? For example, did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for a specific individual, or for a wider audience?
2. Is the author addressing a particular audience or type of audience? Is the information aimed at a specialized or a general audience?
3. Did the recorder intend to inform or persuade others? (Study the language of the source to make conjectures about whether the author intended to be objective or persuasive. For example, does he use selective information or choose terms that are likely to arouse emotion in the reader?)
4. Who would be most likely to disagree with this version of events?

Objective Reasoning

1. Would you say this information is fact, opinion, or propaganda? (Facts can usually be verified; opinions, even if based on factual information, are merely the author's interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make it difficult to tell the difference.)
2. Is the information supported by evidence or by other witnesses? Can you identify any errors or omissions?

C. Coverage

1. Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Have you searched for a variety of viewpoints?
2. Double-check: Is the material primary or secondary in nature?

Basic Rules for Analysis of Primary Sources (adapted from <http://www.edteck.com/dbq/>)

- A. The **TIME AND PLACE** rule: the closer in time and place the source and its author are to the actual event, the likelier to be true. The following types of sources are most likely to be accurate (listed in order, most to least):
1. Direct evidence of the event (photographs, films, printed programs, manuscript copies of speeches)
 2. Descriptions of the event, created at the time it occurred by first-hand participants and observers (recording secretaries, newspaper reporters, stenographers, score-keepers)
 3. Accounts of the event, produced from memory after the event, by firsthand participants and observers.
 4. Accounts of the event, produced by people who were not present, but who have worked with evidence or interviews from the event.
- B. The **BIAS** rule: every source is biased in some way. Any document can substantiate only a) what the writer believed happened, or b) what the writer *wants us* to believe happened. Because the creator's bias can "spin" the truth of a story, a researcher should take great care to do all of the following:
1. Study each source and each piece of evidence critically and skeptically. Assume bias in the handling of the facts.
 2. Consider the creator's point of view – no piece of evidence should ever be taken at face value.
 3. Cross-check everything! Don't depend on a single source of information – always compare sources, when you can, with other accounts of and evidence from the same event.

Determining the Trustworthiness of a Reproduction or Surrogate

Most of the primary source materials you are likely to use in your classes will be digitized copies, photocopies, or transcriptions, so you and your students may need to evaluate how well a primary source surrogate replicates the original version.

1. A credible copy of a primary source should be reproduced as clearly as possible and should include information about the source and version of the copy.
2. Differences between a primary source surrogate and the original can negatively affect your interpretation of the item. For example,
 - a. **Transcripts** of a speech cannot reproduce the inflections and gestures of the speaker or his interaction with the audience. Television news reports often include visual images that may alter the audience's emotional response to the text. A transcript of a manuscript may not include or mention the occurrence of erasures, deletions, or marginal notes that could offer revealing insights about the writer's thinking.
 - b. **Full text online versions** of newspapers and magazines may be quite different from the original. Many photographs, illustrations, advertisements, sidebars, and even some of the articles appearing in the print version do not appear online. Consequently, a researcher may not be able to assess the publication's emphasis on a particular story or to locate other articles on the same topic.
 - c. **Still image reproductions** can differ from the originals in many ways, appearing smaller, altering the texture, or lacking the color and/or detail of the original painting, engraving, or photograph.
 - d. **Sound recordings** can vary significantly depending upon the original format and the quality of the equipment used to record and to play them. Remember that many programs are presented in short segments broken up by advertisements, so that repetition may be used not so much to emphasize material as to remind viewers of something that occurred prior to a commercial break.

Using Finding Aids as a Guide to Primary Research

Many primary source materials available in the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA) reside in collections that are shelved in areas where the public is not permitted. However, librarians can make these sources available to patrons who wish to use them in their research. The best way to learn what is in the various collections is to use finding aids, which are filed in the public services area. For those who cannot easily come to Nashville, TSLA has placed many of our finding aids online (see web address and information below).

Most archival institutions, whether public or private, create similar finding aids to help researchers locate the information they need. Finding aids are explanatory guides or indexes that summarize the information included in agency records, governors' papers, or manuscript collections of individuals and/or families. Such records are identified by name (Luke Lea (1876-1945) Papers 1826-1993) and by record group (RG) numbers (e.g., the Tennessee Department of Health Morbidity and Communicable Diseases Statistics 1917-1931 are classified as RG 252; the State Treasurer's Records 1796-1869 make up RG 23.). PDF versions of Finding Aids from many of the TSLA collections may be accessed from the History and Genealogy link on the main page of our website. (<http://www.state.tn.us/tsla/>)

The Finding Aid consist of several sections, some providing background on the persons or institutions behind the collections, and some analyzing and describing details of the collection itself.

- The Introduction provides the title and dates of the collection, a brief description of its size (expressed in linear feet) and contents, a statement concerning its provenance (succession of custody), and any restrictions on the use of the materials. Other background material, including historical or biographical data, is sometimes included.
- The Biographical Sketch/Agency History helps to place the material that makes up the collection into the context of the person's life or the history of an organization. This section is not intended to provide an exhaustive history, but only to help establish an approach to the collection. It may be written as a biographical narrative or as a chronological list.
- The Scope and Content section summarizes the range of the archival materials included in the collection (their scope) and provides greater detail about the kinds of information they contain (their content). This section is highly specific as to what materials are in the collection and how they are organized. It may also include comments on the arrangement of the collection/record group, kinds of materials to be found, discussion of its strengths and weaknesses, peculiarities of arrangement, and strategies for best use of collection/record group. It is extremely useful information to the researcher, being both more detailed and more analytical than the introduction.
- The Container List is a comprehensive list of the material in the collection, box by box and folder by folder – even, in some cases, item by item. If the material has been microfilmed, the applicable microfilm numbers will also be included.
- Additional Descriptive Data may include a listing of audiovisual materials, maps, and other materials from the collection, particularly if they are stored in another area of the facility because of their size, shape, or condition.